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ABSTRACT

Empirical research in education seems to have an international tendency to concentrate on problems that can be grasped adequately. But that approach tends to direct more research to smaller and smaller areas, where results are more precise but more irrelevant for the complex practice of education. To try to bridge this gap between research and practice in adult education in West Germany, a special institute was founded more than 20 years ago. The institute, in Frankfurt, is now one of the largest scientific institutes in the field of adult education. The Paedagogische Arbeitsstelle (PAS)--in English, the Educational Working Center for Adult Education--is a mediation agency bringing adult education researchers and practitioners together through meetings of researchers and practitioners and through production of more than 100 publications yearly. PAS focuses on the learning process of adult education and what is really changing through the process. Researchers also work with practitioners in the classroom to improve educational strategy. This institute is especially valuable at the present time, when adult education is experiencing a resurgence and growth in West Germany. Not only are professional and vocational courses becoming ever more popular, but more and more people are also taking cultural and personal development courses. (KC)

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Günther Dohmen

The Linkage between Research and Practice in Adult Education

It's a great honor for me to be invited to deliver this address to you. Thank you very much - also for the friendly hospitality you gave to the German visiting group here.

I was told that in the USA a keynote address should start with something like a keynote story. I try to live up to this expectation. Here is my story :

A drunken man crawled around a street lamp.
A passenger asked him: "What are you looking for ?"
The answer was: "I look for my key. I lost it over there."
And the drunken man pointed into the darkness.
"But if you lost your key over there - why are you looking for it here ?" The drunken man answered:
"Well, because here it is light, here I can see something."

Well, I can assure you that I was not drunk when I tried to find a suitable key - note address for you.
But I certainly could only find something which was in the light of my awareness.
And may be the real key is somewhere outside of it.

I dare to ask the general question:
Isn't this also true for our research work ?
Don't we also often confine our search to the segments where the light of our awareness, the beam of our interest , clear up the scene ?

And doesn't that often mean that we neglect keys which lie outside of the searchlight patterns of our awareness and understanding - and which nevertheless could be keys to pathbreaking impulses to the practice ?

But perhaps this handicap is in a way unavoidable ? Does it make any sense to do research if we do not have the light of a clear perception of the problem and the goal ?

If we do not have an intelligent question as a sort of searchlight we'll probably not find an intelligent answer - no matter what elaborate methods and technology we may apply.

This seems to be a familiar international problem - concerning some basic limitations of human knowlegde and research.

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Attending your conference I sometimes really felt like being at home - not only because you are so nice people here but also because we seem to be faced to similar problems, especially if we deal with the tension between research and practice in adult and continuing education.

Empirical research seems to have an international tendency to concentrate on problems which we can adequately grasp in the light of our special questions and methods.

But what comes out of this research is not always relevant to the practitioners of adult and continuing education.

Especially in our quantative empirical research we seem to have a common tendency to direct always smaller and sharper beams into the darkness.

And that can mean that our results are getting more and more precise, but also more and more narrow, and more and more irrelevant for a complex practice.

But on the other hand our qualitative hermeneutic research may direct a broader diffuse light on our research scenery but this often is a light which distorts and changes everything subjectivaly.

How did we try to bridge this gap between research and practice in adult education in West Germany ?

More than 20 years ago the DVV, the German Association for public adult education, founded a special institute around one central task : to bridge the gap between research and practice in adult and continuing education.

This institute is situated in Frankfurt and it is now one of the largest scientific institutes in the field of adult education in Europe. Its name is "Pädagogische Arbeitsstelle" - Educational Working Center for Adult Education.
The common abbreviation is "PAS". The German pronunciation is:..

When we founded this institute our point of departure was the experience that our researchers often did not know the questions and did not meet the needs of the practitoners and that the practitioners often were unable to articulate their problems in a way that made them handy for research.

So we thought we should have a sort of mediation agency specialized on brigding these gaps.

The PAS has now some 70 full time employees working in different subject areas like vocational training, cultural education, natural sciences, health education, language learning etc. and it has cross-section departments for documentation, statistics, media technology, publications and in-service-training.

In addition we are planning to establish new target-group sections for education of illiterates, foreigners, seniors, women etc.

As the PAS is an institute of the DVV, the German Association of the Volkshochschulen, the Public Adult Education Institutions, it is institutionally connected with the practice of adult education.
The board of the DVV is also the board of the PAS.

In addition the PAS has an advisory council with representatives of research institutions, ministeries of education and experts of adult and continuing education.

How does this institute try to bridge the gap between research and practice in adult education ?

First of all it organizes many meetings of practitioners and experts from the different areas of adult education.

And these seminars and conferences have a double function:

First the practitioners should define their problems and their expectations to researchers.

Secondly research work relevant to the practice of adult education is imparted and interpreted to practitioners and discussed with them.

Of course the PAS cannot do this research itself. But it's special field is doing exploration studies or pilot studies or case studies which try to clear up the main areas of research-to-practice-interests in the field of adult and continuing education.

The PAS tries to give clear descriptions of the problems of the practice and of the feasability of research strategies to solve them. It flashes on the search lights which light up special areas and ways where researchers then can try to find some key-answers for the practice.

In order to be able to improve the flow of information between research and practice the PAS has a computerized data bank which comprises any German publication relevant to Adult Education - including articles in educational magazines, journals etc.

But I think most important are the publications of PAS.

This institute brings out nearly 100 publications every year. They are published in different series.

The three most important one's are:

1. a pocket book series which chiefly reports on adult education research-work-results and their implications to adult education practice,

2. a report and material series chiefly on practical experiments in different areas of adult education and their evaluation,

3. a series with annotated bibliographies for instructional and media materials in different subject areas.

You may now ask : What sort of research did the PAS initiate and what proved to be especially fruitful for the practice ?

For some time the PAS concentrated on clearing up the expectations of adults towards further education and on the most effective organisational and didactical framework to meet these expectations.

This was based on an understanding that the learning motivation largely depends on social factors and individual biographies which can be analyzed and that the best fitting of learning facilities can be empirically proved.

Now the PAS concentrates more on the process of learning and there they try a special approach which is different to the usual psychological research on intelligence, learning and memory.

The main question is : What is really changing in or through learning processes ?

In order to get answers to this questions the PAS tries to concentrate research on changes of mental points of view and patterns of interpretations. The German term is "Deutungsmuster" -"patterns of interpretation" may come near to it.
What happens to our views, our awareness, our opinions, our patterns of apprehension and judgement in different learning processes ?

The general thesis is : If adult education is supposed to change attitudes and behavior then this chiefly works through changing the views and the patterns of interpretation of people.

We want to understand the "Deutungsmuster", the patterns of interpretation and their modifications and transformations in and through learning processes.

Our neuro-physiologists tell us that "recognizing patterns " is the main characteristic of learning. Through our long evolution learning developped from the construction of neuronal networks which more and more became able to recognize patterns.

And our electronic researchers who try to simulate intelligent systems in computer programs are beginning to construct computer networks which can recognize common patterns in a mass of diverse data.

This seems to be a key to human learning and understanding.

We structure a chaos of information by relating our impressions to fundamental patterns of classification and interpretation.

This helps us to overlook and unravel the confusing diversity of information and experiences.

So we can understand learning as a permanent process of adaptation between our experiences and our patterns of understanding and judging.

And our cognitive patterns are connected with our patterns of behavior. In German we speak of "Dispositionen", which means something like attitudes, patterns of reaction, inclinations which comprise cognition and feeling, thinking and behavior.

Anyway: Focussing on ways to influence patterns of awareness and interpretation seems to be an approach where research meets severe problems and needs of educational practice.

As to research methods there came out a new concentration on qualitative research dealing with interpretations of interpretations.

One approach is a sort of "flexing" different modes of teaching and facilitating - and then analyzing their influences on the interpretational patterns of different learners.

This analysis is done with different sorts of interviews, stimulated recall, loud thinking, participating observation etc.

This approach aims at a better understanding of different cognitive structures, different structures of knowledge and their development and transformation through learning - including their constrictions and distortions.

We want to come to a deeper understanding of the processes of learning by grasping its transformation effects on views and interpretations.

This requires mainly hermeneutic evaluation : interpretations of documentations, including video documentations, of narrative interviews, of transcriptions of courses and discussion proceedings, of self interpretations of the participants in the context of their biographical background and identity etc.

A central problem is of course the safeguarding against arbitrary interpretations of interpretation changes.

The PAS tries to materialize this in so called "Interpretations-werkstätten" - interpretation workshops. There adequate interpretations shall be tested in a mutual exchange of observation, argumentation, sensitization, structural analysis and alternative classifications.

One field of testing is also the In-Service-Training of practitioners whose competence of understanding and influencing learning processes shall be improved - and these improvements of course shall be evaluated.

Well, this may be enough here to give you a hint about this approach.

But even with this approach there is still a tension between researchers and practitioners because both have difficulties to acknoledge and appreciate the performance of the other.

To bridge this tension we have just made a successfull experiment in the adult education department of the university of Tübingen:

Some of our research people dealing with didactical implications of new perceptions in learning processes go into adult education courses together with the normal course leader or facilitator.

And the researcher then does not only act as supervisor who after the course gives his critic and advice.
Here the researcher also takes over the role of a facilitator for certain parts of the course where he thinks there should be a change - for instance to better motivate or activate certain participants.

So the researcher has the challenge and the chance to prove his or her competence in practical situations. And this can also give him or her a real experience of the difficult job of the practioner.

Let me now please say a word about the general situation of adult and continuing education in West Germany as a favorable background for this sort of research-to-practice linkages.

We have at the moment a rather broad consensus in our country about the superior importance of adult and continuing education for our future.

Leading politicians of all our political parties unanimously speak about the importance of lifelong learning.

Sometimes you can get the impression that this is almost the only point on which they all agree - at least as long as it is not coming down to concrete financial consequences.

There are different reasons for this adult and continuing education boom in our public opinion:

First of all there is a rather general awareness that our economic development largely depends on the education of our people, our teachers, our engineers, our craftsmen, our experts and may I add : also our politicians.

The quality of our products depends on the competence of our professionals but also on the creativity of thinking, information processing and judging in our whole population.

This is especially true for our overcrowded country in the center of Europe which has no other resources, especially no oil and no space.

And it is actually urgent in view of the common European market.

These economic concerns were the first locomotive for an adult education boom in West Germany.

But then there came up a heavy critic against the one-sided predominance of only professional and vocational training in this boom.

The call for an equal promotion of general, cultural, political adult education became louder and louder.

Today more and more even of our business- and industry-leaders realize that a good general education is a necessary base for all specialist training courses.

In the actual practice of adult education today courses in general and cultural education are at least as popular in our country as vocational courses.

In my state for instance, Baden Württemberg (this is the Heidelberg and Black Forest area) which is leading in High Tech the prime minister has initiated a new " High Culture" Movement.

The intention is to compensate the fast development of new technologies by a broad cultural development - both mediated by adult and continuing education.

In the largest public adult education institutions in Germany, the Volkshochschulen ("Peoples's Colleges") only 25 % of the courses given are related to professional areas and careers whereas 29 % are foreign language courses, 20% health courses and 19 % art and design courses.

Why do we emphasize general education of adults like that ?

There is a growing conviction that we need a broad comprehensive development of as many human competences as possible for the new challenges of an unknown future.

And there are also large groups of our adult population who especially need the help of general education.

One group are the millions of unemployed people who do not only need vocational training to get a better position in the battle for a job .

They also need the help of adult education to keep their health, their personal and social identity, to see a meaning of their life even if they have no job, to understand that their life can also be a frame-work for hobbies, for political engagement, for art, music, conviviality, religion - and personal enrichment.

And another group are the old people. At the end of this century about 30 % of the West German population will be older than 60.

The interests of these old people are not very much job oriented any more.
They are more interested in communication, participation, in community life,, social work, hobby groups, guided study tours - and for reflections and discussions on the meaning of life and death etc.

And there are the women - who are in a way dominating the adult education scenery in West Germany: 72% of all the participants in our people's colleges are women. And they are very much interested in personal development and general education.

And we have another group of people in West Germany who just recently came into the center of our public interest.

The last elections and opinion polls in West Germany show that about 20% of the adult people have the feeling to be overstrained by the tempo, the complexity and the stress of modern life.

These people are falling back from the general trend to ever more progress, efficiency, profit, career and technology.

The growing number of people who do not have the competence, the self confidence and the motivation to get along with the challenges of modern societies seems to be a severe problem also in the US.

I think it is not fair and it is not acceptable that one part of a prospering society shall stay in social and educational misery.

We adult educators have at least to offer to them inviting conditions and motivating possibilities for further learning by which they can improve the competences they need to better master their lives in a complex modern democratic society.

One part of this educationally underprivileged group feels their social status endangered by all these new developments, by everything which is new and different, especially by all these strangers, refugees, and the new-comers from the eastern countries pouring into West Germany every day.

And out of a sort of social fear caused by these current changes some people are inclined to vote for antimodernistic right wing parties who promise clearly arranged order and security and a strong conservative leadership which will keep out all these alienating influences and alarming changes.

This development became now realized as a new challenge for our society, for our democracy and for our adult and continuing education.

For adult education this means that we should offer a new elementary education for those undereducated people - and most of them are not Illiterates:

More and more people with normal school education need help now to come along with modern society and with the complicated democratic procedures and technological means to solve its problems.

And we hope it is also an effective approach to help these people if we try to improve their patterns of awareness and interpretation.

But hearing all this you may think that adult education is in danger to become overstrained by all these challenges.
Every new problem of our society seems to cause new expectations towards adult and continuing education.

But new challenges also promote new developments in adult education - as for instance the special development of our research-to-practice linkages.

The approaches of the PAS which I tried to outline to you are in a way also a reaction to the growing awareness in our society that many problems of this society and of its problem-groups are also psychological and educational problems:

Problems of views, attitudes, dispositions, opinions, of unadequate patterns of interpretation, judgement and motivation.

The problem is not always just the problem itself. It can also be the way how people see it, how they construct and interprete it - in relation to their own self esteem, self assessment, social identity, educational biography etc.

And as adult education is expected to deal with those interpretations and their modification it comes into the center of the public interest.

Adult education is publicly asked to help our society to overcome some of the problems it has - especially with some special target groups. We should change their unadequate attitudes, views and motivations by organizing or facilitating effective learning processes.

These expectations are certainly a big chance, but they are also a big danger.

Adult education cannot generally solve the problems of modern societies by influencing their interpretations.

Our problems are not merely problems of interpretation.

And therefore should adult education not accept it as its central task to mentally adapt people to the actual structures of the different societies.

We think adult education should primarily be participant-oriented - not society-oriented.
That means: We have first of all to help the people, the individual persons, the problem groups, by developing their abilities and competences.

It is a central point in the program of the DVV, the German Association of Public Adult Education, that it should be the primary task of adult education to develop the general and special competences of human beings who shall be enabled to have their own views, their own judgement, their own patterns of interpretation - and their own conscience.

And one approach to this general goal seems to be that people learn to understand the patterns of their own thinking and the influence of their interpretations on their judgement and behavior.
And they should learn to understand other people's patterns of awareness and interpretation.

It is difficult to say now how adult education will come along with these challenges.

We are here to learn from you how you solve these problems, how you do bridge the gaps between research and practice - and the gaps between political expectations and educational possibilities.

We have learned a lot during these rich days here and I am sure international contact, international exchange, international cooperation and international friendship will improve our chances to master the big challenges of the future.

We especially need international cooperation in our field of adult and continuing education because its rapidly growing importance is also an international challenge and perspective.